



# Focus Group Report **Seniors & Walking:** Barriers and Opportunities 2018



## ABOUT

This report was developed by the Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center within the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. The research team included Charles T. Brown, MPA, Principal Investigator, Devajyoti Deka, Ph.D., Andrea Lubin, James Sinclair, and Lisa Cintron.

The Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC) is a national leader in the research and development of innovative transportation policy. Located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, VTC has the full array of resources from a major research university on transportation issues of regional and national significance.

The New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center (BPRC) assists public officials, transportation and health professionals, and the public in creating a safer and more accessible walking and bicycling environment through primary research, education and dissemination of information about best practices in policy and design. The Center is supported by the New Jersey Department of Transportation through funds provided by the Federal Highway Administration.

Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center  
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
33 Livingston Avenue, Fourth Floor  
New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901

For questions, please contact Charles T. Brown, MPA, Principal Investigator:  
[charles.brown@ejb.rutgers.edu](mailto:charles.brown@ejb.rutgers.edu)



# Introduction

In order to more fully understand the walking habits, barriers, and needs of older adults in New Jersey, the VTC research team conducted three focus groups with this population. A focus group is a type of qualitative research that provides researchers with an opportunity to build on survey data findings in a number of ways. First, by convening a facilitated conversation among seniors with open-ended questions and a series of prompts related to walking, participants have the opportunity to provide deeper insight into their unique walking experiences as older adults, in contrast to simply responding to a survey question. Next, focus groups foster the collection of diverse views on a given topic and encourage participants to discuss issues that researchers may not have thought of as vital to the topic. Finally, the focus group format allows the research team to use photos or other visual aids to help stimulate conversation.

For this study, focus group participants were recruited through the mail survey. When completing the survey, respondents were asked to provide their contact information and indicate a willingness to volunteer as a focus group participant. As incentive for their participation, they were offered a light lunch and fifty-dollar stipend. The names of those who marked their interest in participating were separated into three distinct groups: residents of Monroe Township living within a gated age-restricted community; residents of Monroe Township living outside a gated community; and residents of Holiday City and several other local age-restricted communities in Toms River/Manchester. At the time of selection, seventy-one residents near Toms River and one hundred and thirty-four residents of Monroe Township had indicated a willingness to participate in a focus group.

Two of the focus groups were convened at the Monroe Township Community Center and one at the Manchester branch of the Ocean County library system. These locations were selected due to their proximity to the participants, accessibility, and free parking. To appeal to the greatest number of potential participants, the focus groups were each scheduled at noon during a weekday. Individuals who indicated interest in participating were selected at random, called to see if they were still interested in participating, and asked if they were available during the proposed time/date. If so, they were asked to confirm their place of residence, age, race, and gender. This information was used to ensure that the focus groups included as diverse a range of individuals as feasible. The research team targeted 10-12 participants for each session, with a total of 30 ultimately participating in one of the three sessions convened. On the day prior to each focus group, the research team followed up via phone with all confirmed participants to remind them of the session time and location.

In preparation for the focus groups, the research team visited both Monroe and the Toms River area. During these trips, the team took photos of various area sites – such as local parks, shopping centers, and older adult housing developments – that were shared during the focus groups to promote discussion. Additionally, through this field work, the team acquired better familiarity with the two communities, which was helpful in facilitating the discussions.

The primary discussion for all three focus groups was led by Senior Research Project Manager Andrea Lubin, with support from Research Project Coordinators Lisa Cintron and James Sinclair. Each participant was welcomed upon arrival and given a study consent form to read and sign that was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB), an entity that is part of the University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP). The consent form explained the

purpose of the study and participant rights as research subjects. The facilitator also shared an overview of the topics to be discussed during the 90-minute to two-hour discussion, and the participants were asked to consent to an audio recording to assist with note taking. In total, approximately twenty questions, including follow-ups, were prepared and discussed during the focus group (See Appendix A). Finally, participants were asked to complete an anonymous form asking several basic demographic questions, such as age and income. Findings from these demographic questionnaires are described below.

## **FOCUS GROUP 1 | MONROE TOWNSHIP, OLDER ADULT GATED COMMUNITIES**

The first focus group was held on October 23, 2018 with older adults who lived in an age-restricted gated community in Monroe Township.

### ***Demographics***

As shown in Table 1, six of the ten focus group participants were female and four were male. All of the participants were over the age of 60, with the median age being in the 75-79 range. Education levels were split, with half the group having attained at least a bachelor's degree, while the other half had some college or less. Only one participant was still in the workforce, while the remaining nine were retired. There was a large variation in household income, from under \$50,000 to over \$150,000. In regards to race and ethnicity, all the participants were White and not Hispanic, despite research team efforts to identify racially diverse participants. All participants reported their household had a least one car, with 40% having two or more cars in their respective household. Additionally, every participant reported that they had driven a car in the previous thirty days.

**Table 1. Focus Group 1 Participant Demographic Characteristics**

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	6	60%
	Male	4	40%
Age	65-69	2	20%
	70-74	2	20%
	75-79	3	30%
	80-84	0	0%
	85-89	3	30%
Education	High School	1	10%
	Some College	4	40%
	Associate Degree	0	0%
	Bachelor's Degree	1	10%
	Postgraduate Degree	4	40%
Occupation	Retired	9	90%
	Not physically demanding job (e.g., office worker)	1	10%
Race	White, not Hispanic	10	100%
Household Income	\$25,000 - \$49,999	2	20%
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	2	20%
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	2	20%
	\$100,000 - \$149,999	1	10%
	\$150,000 - \$199,999	2	20%
	Did Not Respond	1	10%
Cars in Household	One	6	60%
	Two	3	30%
	Three or more	1	10%
Drove in Last 30 Days	Yes	10	100%

## Discussion

### Introductions

The research team began the focus groups by asking participants to introduce themselves, sharing their first name, how many years they had lived in the community, and their primary mode of transportation. The attendees represented seven of the thirteen gated communities in Monroe (Clearbrook, GreenBriar, Regency, Rossmoor, Stonebridge, Encore, and Whittingham). Four of the participants had moved into one the communities in the past five years, with the rest having lived longer in the area – thirty years being the longest. All respondents stated that they drove a car as their primary mode of transportation, with one driving to a park-and-ride for bus service into Manhattan.

## **Living in a Gated Community**

Participants were asked why they had chosen to move into a gated community in Monroe. The most common reason was to downsize from their previous home. Six of the respondents chose Monroe because it was located close to their friends or family. Others enjoyed the central New Jersey location, the security provided by the gated living environment, and the convenience of having minimum property maintenance. None of the participants had any regrets about choosing to live in a gated community.

Participants were asked if the availability of sidewalks was a consideration when selecting their home. Three participants stated that they did consider sidewalks when looking. One was disappointed after realizing that although their street had sidewalks, many others in the community did not. Others noted that they appreciated the availability of sidewalks, but it was not a part of their home purchase decision. Two participants stated that the availability of nearby fitness centers was of greater importance. One participant added that they had lived his entire life in a rural area without sidewalks, so sidewalk presence was not a consideration for him. Notably, almost all agreed now that full sidewalk coverage is a must. Some shared they did not realize how limiting lack of sidewalks would be to their travel options. Several participants who were dog owners indicated that when sidewalks are not present, they must walk their pet on the roadway or a neighbor's lawn. Regarding the former option, concern for high speed traffic and drivers not stopping at posted stop signs was discussed.

***“Having sidewalks would be great. I would love it.”***

Although not a focus of the discussion, several participants spoke about street lights near their homes, indicating they were both too dim and sparsely located. One stated that they had selected their home because there was a street light located at the end of the driveway. Another participant also appreciated the presence of street lights, but complained that they were not bright enough to be fully useful.

***“The street lights are so dim that you can’t see what you’re doing.”***

The group was unanimous in stating that living in a gated community helped them to remain active. The primary reason was what they perceived as the safety offered by the community, with one participant adding that they knew of only four home break-ins over the course of twenty years. Aside from the security of community gates, many of the Monroe gated communities also have patrolling security guards.

However, while fear of crime was minimal, participants discussed personal safety while walking, indicating a concern with getting injured while walking alone. Thus, they took additional steps to protect their own safety when walking. For example, almost all reported they typically walk with a partner/friend and always carry their cell phone. Interestingly, all participants shared they walk in their development at night, and when doing so bring a flashlight, cellphone, and/or wear reflective clothing. One participant stressed the importance of walking against traffic. Multiple participants talked about always carrying a “Life Alert” (or similar) device with them, which allows the user to immediately call 911 with the push of a button if a safety issue arises.

## **Frequency and Purpose of Walking Trips**

Participants were asked how many days of the week they walked for fun or exercise. Four responded that they did so daily, and three stated that they walked for exercise or fun on some days. The remaining three participants stated that they never walked for recreational purposes. One of the attendees who walks every day for fun does so as part of a walking group, which completes a one-mile loop twice a day on weekdays.

Those who walk for fun were asked where they enjoyed going for a walk. Five stated that they enjoyed going to Thompson Park, a 675-acre park managed by Middlesex County located about five miles from the Monroe Township Community Center. The park features a lake, small zoo, dog park, recreational fields, picnic groves, disc-golf, and walking trails. It is important to note that participants access the Park by driving. Aside from this Park, the participants mostly walk within their gated community.

Only one attendee stated that they walked for transportation purposes, such as going shopping or to a doctor appointment. The only other utilitarian walking done was to reach the clubhouse or bocce courts within the gated community for social gatherings, or to walk to a neighbor's house. One participant stated that they lived on the far side of his gated community, so they drove to the shops. Additionally, several noted that walking back from shopping with bags would be a challenge.

The participants provided anecdotes about other people in their community who chose to walk. They mentioned that those living near the shops did sometimes walk to Rite Aid or Dunkin Donuts. Additionally, some residents were seen walking to the commuter bus stop outside the development main gate. However, many preferred to drive to the park and ride to avoid walking across busy traffic lanes located outside the community.

The attendees were asked if they walked more or less since they moved to the gated community. The group was split, with half saying they walk more now, and the other half stating that they walk less. One attendee stated that he walks significantly less because he lives too far from shops or other destinations. However, another respondent noted the opposite, stating that in his previous residence he could not walk for recreation. Two respondents shared that their health has declined as they have gotten older, making walking more challenging.

## **Barriers to Walking**

As mentioned previously, two of the attendees noted that personal barriers (e.g. problems related to their hip) had hindered their ability to walk. In regards to environmental barriers, distance to destinations from their homes was a recurring issue cited, as the developments were described as largely isolated from nearby destinations of interest and often too large to navigate beyond. Others discussed traffic-related dangers of walking. For example, participants talked about the barrier posed by intersections. At one local intersection, multiple participants noted that the walk signal was not long enough for them to safely cross. Additionally, drivers are able to turn left across the crosswalk while pedestrians are crossing. Respondents stated that they felt this was a hazard, and were not comfortable crossing at this location because they did not trust that drivers would see them and yield. They added that if certain safety measures were taken, such as lengthening the signal timing, residents could walk more safely to several nearby destinations including a bank, Dunkin Donuts, and some area restaurants.

Other physical/environmental barriers discussed included a lack of sidewalks along entire routes, lack of adequate sidewalk lighting, and uneven sidewalks or sidewalks in need of other repairs in some communities. Some also cited the problem of “sidewalks to nowhere,” lamenting when sidewalk placement ends prior to reaching a destination. Additionally, none of the communities have benches along the sidewalks, only at the clubhouses. Participants stated that they would like to use benches, but they understood that some residents would not like a bench placed in front of their homes.

Only one respondent expressed concern about crime, with the others stating that they felt very safe within their communities. That said, all respondents were cognizant of their age, and took measures to avoid being stranded if they fell during a walk. These measures included walking in groups, carrying a cell phone, or subscribing to an emergency response service, such as Life Alert. Traffic safety was also a major concern for the group, even within their development’s residential streets. Participants had a discussion about how some older drivers should no longer be driving, and most agreed that speeding activity was more common within the communities than outside due to a lack of police enforcement within the gated areas.

*“I didn’t want to walk in the street because some of the older folks in the community drive all over the place – you take your lives in your hands.”*

### Photo Prompts

Participants were shown photos of area destinations in order to spur discussion on what they liked or did not like about the walking conditions in the locations pictured. The photos shared were of Thompson Park, Downtown Jamesburg, several area gated communities, the Monroe Township Senior Center, and the Concordia Shopping Center, where one of the area’s only grocery stores is located.

Most of the participants were familiar with the photos of Thompson Park (Figure 1), and spoke highly of walking conditions there, primarily because of the many interesting things to see and enjoy at this facility. However, they noted that a walking path along the lake, and benches along park walking paths would make the park even more amenable to walking activity. The participants liked that the park had restrooms, but none had made use of them.



Figure 1: Thompson Park, Photo 1



The photos of Downtown Jamesburg (Figure 2) elicited less of a positive response. The pull-in parking adjacent to the railroad embankment was mentioned as a problem, because there is no sidewalk between the car and the crosswalk. As such, people have to cross in the middle of the street, where they do not feel safe. Crossing the railroad tracks was also a problem for the seniors, as the sanctioned crossing points were far apart, even though trains are very rare at this site. Additionally, the respondents noted that the speed limits varied on each side of the railroad, which was confusing.

*“It’s a nice little town, but you take your life into your hands when you go there.”*



Figure 2: Downtown Jamesburg, Photo 3

Aside from the lack of lighting, all respondents were comfortable with the walking environments shown in the photos of the local gated communities (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Gated Communities, Photo 1

Regarding the Senior Center (Figure 4), the respondents stated that it was impossible to walk there, but it was easy to drive to, and lighting was not an issue because the center closes at 4:30pm.



**Figure 4: Senior Center, Photo 2**

The photo of the Concordia Shopping Center (Figure 5) led into a spirited discussion of dangerous driving at this location. Most of the respondents stated that they would like to see the parking lanes reconfigured, possibly to one-way aisles. All the participants agreed that they avoided the shopping center during busy hours due to the traffic and impatient drivers.



**Figure 5: Concordia Shopping Center, Photo 2**

## ***Conclusions***

The participants seemed to enjoy living in their gated community and were overall interested in safe walking activity within their gated facility. While these communities provide limited means to walk to shops or services, all the participants took advantage of the social connectivity provided within their neighborhoods. Every participant spoke of using a neighborhood amenity, such as the fitness center, clubhouse, or bocce courts, all of which are located within walking distance of the homes. Additionally, the participants found other ways to socialize in their neighborhood, such as by joining a walking club, or attending a weekly poker game. However, since all of the participants reported driving, they may find that their quality of life will decrease if at some point they are unable to drive to reach necessary and desired services.

Participants were vocal and unified in their request for specific elements that would contribute to increased walking activity. Those elements focused on increased sidewalk installation, street lighting, benches, and longer signal pedestrian crossing times. Notably, concern with crime was not discussed as a main deterrent to walking, although participants widely expressed that they opt to

walk with a partner in case they fall or injure themselves while walking and to prevent the possibility of being seen as a target for criminal activity.

## FOCUS GROUP 2 – MONROE TOWNSHIP, GENERAL COMMUNITY

The second focus group in Monroe took place on November 16, 2018 and was with older adults residing in Monroe Township, but not within an age-restricted community.

### *Demographics*

Due to an unexpected snowstorm the evening before the focus group, only seven participants were able to attend. As shown in Table 2, four of the participants were male, two were female, and one declined to share their gender. All participants were between the ages of 65 and 84. Education levels were split, with four of the participants having attained a bachelor's degree or higher, while the other three had some college or less education. The most common occupation for the attendees was retirement, with only one participant in the workforce. Six of the seven respondents reported a household income in the \$75,000 - \$99,999 bracket, with one attendee reporting between \$100,000 - \$149,999. All participants were White, and six of the seven stated they were not Hispanic, with one attendee not responding to that question. All participants had a car in their household, with five of the seven having two cars. Every participant reported having driven in the previous 30 days.

**Table 2. Focus Group 2 Participant Demographic Characteristics**

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	2	29%
	Male	4	57%
	Did Not Respond	1	14%
Age	65-69	1	14%
	70-74	2	29%
	75-79	3	43%
	80-84	1	14%
Education	High School	1	14%
	Some College	2	29%
	Associate Degree	0	0%
	Bachelor's Degree	3	43%
	Postgraduate Degree	1	14%
Occupation	Retired	6	86%
	Physically demanding job (e.g., construction worker, machine operator, delivery, retail)	1	14%
Race	White	7	100%
Hispanic	No	6	86%
	Did Not Respond	1	14%
Household Income	\$75,000 - \$99,999	6	86%
	\$100,000 - \$149,999	1	14%
Cars in Household	One	1	14%
	Two	5	71%
	Three or more	1	14%
Drove in Last 30 Days	Yes	7	100%



## ***Discussion***

### **Introductions**

Again the focus group discussion began with the research team asking participants to introduce themselves by sharing their first name, noting how many years they had lived in Monroe, and discussing their primary mode of transportation. All the attendees were long-time residents of Monroe, with six of the seven having lived in the township for over 30 years, and longest residing in Monroe since 1970. The most recent resident moved to Monroe in 1980. All respondents stated that they drove a car as their only mode of transportation, though one stated that he occasionally walks to a nearby store.

### **Living in Monroe Township**

Participants were asked to discuss their original reasons for moving to Monroe. Housing affordability and low property taxes were main factors, with several sharing they “got a good deal” when purchasing their home. Three stated that they had previously lived in New York City, and were looking to live somewhere affordable with more space.

It is important to note that Monroe is a large township, encompassing over forty-two square miles. As such, portions of the municipality are suburban, while other sections are rural. Two of the participants had already lived in New Jersey but were looking for a more rural environment when they found their home in Monroe, with one sharing that Monroe was “peaceful at the time,” with little traffic or congestion. In addition, at the time many moved to Monroe, the township was largely undeveloped, with no municipal sewer or water service in areas, but they were drawn to the town due to its’ low property taxes.

When asked if presence of sidewalks was a consideration in selecting their home in Monroe, the participants who had previously lived in New York and moved to a suburban development in Monroe stated that they did want a neighborhood where they and their children could walk and bicycle safely. Others were not interested in sidewalks. Regardless of which part of town they moved to, for most of the participants, relocating to Monroe was a new start, as only one attendee knew people in town before moving there.

The group was asked if they had ever considered or would now consider living in one of Monroe’s gated older adult communities. Six of the seven were not interested, citing much higher home prices, community fees, and regulations. They also discussed feeling comfortable in their current home. One participant however was actively considering moving into an older adult community because as he ages, he would like a residence requiring less maintenance than his current large property. When prompted about safety, the participants all shared that they felt Monroe was already a safe township, and that the small fence provided by the gated communities did not really provide any additional security.

### **Frequency and Purpose of Walking Trips**

Participants were asked how many days of the week they walked for fun or exercise. Only one participant reported doing so daily, but he noted that he walks on his 10-acre property, rather than in a public park or around the neighborhood. Two of the participants stated that they only walk for fun one or two days a week, with the remaining four attendees stating that they walk two to five days a week.

“We have no sidewalks, so we have to drive everywhere we go.”

The next questions prompted the participants to discuss where they walked for fun or exercise. Three of the attendees stated that they walked in their immediate neighborhood, either around the block, or to the home of a family member. One participant stated that she walks on the treadmill at the gym, while another walks in a lightly used area behind the township soccer fields where his dog can accompany him without a leash.

Only one participant reported walking for general transportation purposes in a typical week, with this person walking to a local store. A second person shared that she walks to her dentist, but that is only a few times per year. The other participants explained that they could not do so because they do not live near any needed or desired destinations. One participant mentioned that the closest food market was located a few miles away from her home, there were no sidewalks along the route, and vehicle speeds in the vicinity were too high to facilitate safe walking.

The participants were asked if they had given any thought to how they would meet their transportation needs if they were no longer able to drive. None reported considering other options at this time. One noted that the Town Senior Center offers shuttles to various destinations, while another inquired among the group as to paratransit service availability in the county. One mentioned Uber as being a possible option in the future, although she had not yet used the service.

Participants also discussed if they walked more or less since they moved to Monroe. All agreed that they walk less since moving to the Township, especially the two who had previously lived in New York City, with main reasons being lack of destinations within walking distance and lack of sidewalks in the community. When asked if they walk more or less since retirement, two stated that they walk more as a retiree. One credited walking for fun as the reason he had lost sixty pounds since retiring from an office job. Another noted walking less now, as her previous job as a teacher required walking throughout the day.

“I had an office job, and I weighed 253lbs when I left, 190lbs now, and I credit that to walking.”

## **Barriers to Walking**

The group was asked if they had any personal health problems that limited their walking. One participant spoke of issues with her knees and lungs as a barrier. Another noted that his knee replacement had made it difficult to stand up, but not to walk. Unlike with the Monroe focus group participants who resided in a gated community, personal safety issues related to getting injured while walking were not raised as a concern among these participants. None of the attendees subscribed to a “Life Alert” style system, and many stated that they tried to have their cell phone on them, but frequently forgot to carry it with them.

In regards to environmental barriers, a participant offered that Monroe was “set up for cars and farmers,” and thus, physical barriers to walking were prevalent. Distance to destinations was a recurring theme discussed. Additionally, the lack of sidewalks made walking dangerous along the narrow roadways. Participants also spoke about speeding traffic, compounded by a lack of defined roadway shoulders. One participant opined that drivers in town “think they are at a racetrack,” with one sharing and almost all agreeing that their fellow senior drivers are often the worst violators of traffic safety laws.

One attendee noted that available sidewalks were poorly maintained, with uplifted segments, low hanging tree branches, and parked cars in driveways encroaching sidewalk space as issues impeding usage. Participants had little to say about lighting, noting that without sidewalks, additional lighting would not make walking easier. They also added that they were not interested in walking in the evening hours when additional lighting would be most beneficial. In regards to benches, one participant spoke highly of the number of benches found in a community in Florida where they vacationed, stating that it would be nice to see more benches in Monroe.

***“I wouldn’t walk more if there were sidewalks because everything is too far.”***

Referring back to some of their experiences living previously in New York or New Brunswick, the group spent some time discussing how even if there was safe walking infrastructure in place, there were few “places of interest” for them to walk to in Monroe. One participant noted missing how interesting a walk in Brooklyn could be, while another spoke about visiting Lawrenceville to people watch. Another noted enjoying walking in Jamesburg. On the other hand, most of the respondents had moved to the area to get away from congestion, and emphasized their dislike for the many new residential and commercial developments being built in Monroe, stating that traffic was soon going to “be a nightmare.”

***“Cars are flying by, even though it’s 35mph, they’re going 40 or 50.”***

### **Photo Prompts**

Participants were shown photos in order to spur discussion on what they liked or did not like about the walking conditions in the local areas pictured. Attendees were shown the same photos from the Monroe gated community focus group: Thompson Park, Downtown Jamesburg, several gated communities, the Monroe Township Senior Center, and the Concordia Shopping Center.

All the participants were familiar with Thompson Park (Figure 6), with one calling it the most interesting destination in the area. Another participant said that it was the best place to people watch, and that the scenery was attractive. However, the only way to access the park was by driving, and two of the participants protested that a number of permitted activities had been limited at the Park in recent years. For example, utilizing the lake for swimming, boating, and ice skating is no longer permitted, and winter activities on a Park hill had been restricted after an accident. All agreed that a walking path along the water would be a nice addition, as would more groomed trails on park property, with clear directional signage to encourage usage. Requests for additional benches and restrooms throughout the park were also shared.



**Figure 6: Thompson Park, Photo 2**

Regarding downtown Jamesburg (Figure 7), the group discussed safety issues with the crosswalks. One participant lamented that while pedestrians had the right-of-way at crosswalks, they were difficult to see at night. Another agreed, stating that pedestrians should wear reflective clothing. One suggestion was to install flashing lights/beacon that pedestrians could activate when crossing. In contrast to the first Monroe focus group, these participants reported no issues with speeding in Jamesburg, and stated that with little traffic, they had no concerns crossing the street to access the angled parking areas.



**Figure 7: Downtown Jamesburg, Photo 1**

The group had little to share about the various Monroe gated community images (Figure 8). One attendee was very familiar with an image from the Clearbrook development because his mother-in-law lived there. He noted that the community was quiet and residents seemed comfortable walking in the roadway. Another stated that while he is considering relocating to one of these age-restricted communities, he is not concerned with presence of sidewalks. Instead, he is focused on housing cost and home design features.





**Figure 8: Gated Communities, Photo 3**

The participants were familiar with the Senior Center (Figure 9), but noted that they all drive to the Center and only need to walk from the parking lot to the front door, which is not difficult. Similar to the first focus group, these participants shared many comments about the Concordia Shopping Center (Figure 10). They complained that there was a lot of vehicular traffic and dangerous driving behavior that occurred within the parking lot, including drivers backing up without first checking for pedestrians.

*“It’s an outright dangerous place, to say the least.”*

*“I’m a senior so I can say it: seniors are horrible drivers.”*



**Figure 9: Monroe Township Senior Center, Photo 3**



**Figure 10: Concordia Shopping Center, Photo 3**

## Recommendations

The focus group conversation concluded with a conversation on participant recommendations for improving their local walking environment. The participants vocalized that the municipal structure was too focused on appealing to the senior residents of the local gated communities, not considering older adult residents who live in the general community. For example, baseball tournaments were organized with teams from each of the different age-restricted communities, but no team was available for residents not residing in such a community. Another stated that the gated communities offered trips to theaters in New Brunswick and other destinations of interest, but nothing similar was available for seniors outside these communities. In total, participants described feeling excluded from many social/recreational opportunities that their peers residing in gated communities enjoyed.

In regards to infrastructure improvements, one participant opined that local politicians were only concerned with responding to the needs of the gated communities, who were likely to vote as a bloc. Additionally, several participants recommended that the township should require area developers to include sidewalks and lighting in their plans, which would help to foster safe walking environments for residents. They acknowledged that in recent years, developers seem to be including more such features than they did in the past.

To make walking safer, speed bumps or other types of speed control devices were recommended. To improve parking lot safety, some participants recommended angled parking in one-way rows as a means to better organize driving activity.

A suggestion that came from this discussion was also for the addition of new, groomed walking trails in the area woods, such as heart healthy trails. One participant stated that they would sometimes walk along the nearby train tracks, and because the tracks only saw 1-2 trains per week, they felt it was a safe and quiet place to walk. Another participant mentioned that adding a trail along the tracks would be a good addition to the Township.

## Conclusions

Overall, participants were somewhat interested in safe walking activity, but it was not described as a major interest or concern. Many did share that they would likely walk more for fun and/or exercise if there were more sidewalks in the town or at least defined roadway shoulders that would provide a buffer from what they described as speeding traffic. They also lamented the lack of places of interest to walk to in town, and requested the creation of more local groomed trails.

Despite the lack of safe and interesting walking opportunities, participants indicated they enjoyed living in their current residence and all but one was not interested in relocating to an older adult community in Monroe or elsewhere. They did however describe feeling excluded from many social/recreational opportunities available in the township to seniors because they do not reside in an older adult development. One lamented that township politicians seek to please residents of the older adult gated communities in Monroe, often forgetting about the needs of Township seniors not residing in these developments.

Notably, concern with crime was not discussed as a main deterrent to walking, nor was the potential of falling during a walk. Instead, concern with speeding traffic was a main deterrent. Participants noted on several occasions that the Township was designed for drivers and creating a more amenable environment for walkers would be difficult. That said, several requested that the Township

should establish more requirements for area developers to create safe walking environments for residents to enjoy.

## FOCUS GROUP 3 – BERKELEY AND MANCHESTER TOWNSHIP

The third focus group was held on November 12, 2018 at the Manchester Branch of the Ocean County Library System and was convened with residents from Holiday City and several other non-gated local age-restricted and non-age restricted communities in Toms River/Manchester.

### *Demographics*

As shown in Table 3, nine of the participants were female, and four were male. Participants of this focus group skewed younger than the other two sessions, with the median age lying in the 65-69 cohort, and the greatest number of attendees (five), identifying in the 60-64 age group. Five of the attendees reported a high school education was the highest level of education attained, with six having a bachelor's degree or higher. Only nine of the participants were retired, with three working physically demanding jobs, and one working a non-physically demanding job. There was a wide range of income levels reported, although this group did report lower income values overall compared to the Monroe participants, with over half this group reporting a household income under \$50,000. All participants had at least one car in their household, and all reported having driven in the previous thirty days. In regards to race, one of the participants was Black, while another selected "other." The eleven remaining participants identified as White. Twelve attendees stated they were not Hispanic, while one did not respond to that question.

**Table 3. Focus Group 3 Participant Demographic Characteristics**

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Female	9	69%
	Male	4	31%
Age	55 - 59	1	8%
	60 - 64	5	38%
	65 - 69	3	23%
	70-74	1	8%
	75-79	1	8%
	80-84	2	15%
Education	High School	5	38%
	Some College	1	8%
	Associate Degree	1	8%
	Bachelor's Degree	3	23%
	Postgraduate Degree	3	23%
Occupation	Retired	9	69%
	Not physically demanding job (e.g., office worker)	1	8%
	Physically demanding job (e.g., construction worker, machine operator, delivery, retail)	3	23%
Race	White	11	85%
	Black	1	8%
	Other	1	8%
Hispanic	No	12	92%
	Did Not Respond	1	8%



Household Income	Less than \$10,000	1	8%
	\$10,000 - \$24,999	2	15%
	\$25,000 - \$49,999	5	38%
	\$50,000 - \$74,999	1	8%
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	2	15%
	\$100,000 - \$149,999	1	8%
	Did Not Respond	1	8%
Cars in Household	One	10	77%
	Two	1	8%
	Three or more	2	15%
Drove in Last 30 Days	Yes	13	100%

## ***Discussion***

### **Introductions**

The focus group discussion began with the research team asking participants to introduce themselves by sharing their first name, noting how many years they had lived at their current address, and discussing their primary mode of transportation. All participants except two reported residing in one of three age-restricted developments: Holiday City, Holiday Heights, and Silver Ridge Park. Two persons reported living in Pine Lake Park (non-age restricted development). All these communities are in close proximity to one another, and can appear as one continuous development to the outside eye. The most recent resident reported moving to her home two years ago, with the longest resident having lived at her current address for twenty-four years.

All respondents stated that they drove a car as their primary mode of transportation and had not really considered other transport options for a future time when they may opt to limit or cease driving. Many added that they enjoyed walking for leisure, but only one stated that he occasionally walks to a nearby store.

### **Living in Berkeley or Manchester Townships**

Participants were asked to talk about why they had chosen to move to Holiday City or another nearby development. The most common reason given was to pay lower property taxes, with one participant noting that his tax burden decreased from \$11,000 to \$2,000 after moving to Holiday City. Other reasons shared included desire to downsize, wanting to live near family, affordable home purchase price, and proximity to the shore without the summer traffic.

Participants from the age-restricted communities, such as Holiday City, explained that these developments were built with sidewalks along all roadways. When asked if sidewalks were a consideration during their home search process, multiple attendees affirmed that it was a factor in their home purchase decision. Notably, the two attendees living in the non-age restricted community reported a lack of sidewalks in their development, with one sharing that she did not feel comfortable walking in her neighborhood due to this lack of sidewalks, citing high speed and careless vehicular traffic concerns. Another participant commented that he had looked at homes in Toms River with sidewalks, but they were too costly.

Several Holiday City dog owners complained their development prohibits dog walking on sidewalks, a practice they found to be unsafe, as it requires they walk their pets on the roadway. These

participants and others voiced concern with high speed traffic and drivers failing to stop at posted stop signs and traffic signals or yield to pedestrians in crosswalks. In general, many participants shared they felt safest walking on sidewalks located on side streets in their development, often avoiding walking on main thoroughfares due to traffic concerns. They also added that many of the unsafe driving practices they experience in their development are committed by older adult peers. Finally, it should be noted that many participants complained that area street lights were too sparsely located in their communities.

The group also discussed safety and crime issues in their neighborhood, and were asked if they would prefer living in a gated community. All agreed that their current community was safe, with one adding that the gated communities probably experienced more crime than non-gated dwellings. Participants did not express concern with crime or with getting injured while walking alone. They all walk alone and feel safe doing so, especially on sidewalks. They did all report bringing a cell phone with them while walking.

### **Frequency and Purpose of Walking Trips**

Participants were asked how many days per week they walk for fun or exercise. Six affirmed that they undertake such activity seven days a week, with three stating that they do so four-five days a week. The remaining four stated that they rarely ever walked for fun or exercise. When discussing walking destinations for fun or exercise, it should be noted participants primarily drive to access these destinations, except for walking activity within their development. One noted driving to Ocean County Mall to walk inside the building for exercise, two stated that they drive to the Seaside Heights boardwalk in the off-season to walk, and some others reported they walk in downtown Toms River to access restaurants, the library, and other local sites. Aside from these destinations, the participants limit walking to around their neighborhood.

For transportation purposes, only one attendee stated that he typically walks to a CVS store, the post office, and a UPS drop-off box. The other participants stated that they lived too far from any destination to be able to walk from their homes. Comments shared included “there is no place to walk here,” and “we live in a food desert.” Additionally, some felt that the traffic on the roads leading to shops was too dangerous to navigate as a pedestrian, especially with drivers making quick or unpredictable turning movements.

The attendees were asked if they walk more or less since they moved to their current address. Seven responded that they walk more, while three affirmed that they walk less. The others stated that their walking habits were the same as before their move. Participants were also asked if they walked more or less since retiring. Five stated that they walk more since retiring, while two said that they walk less. One participant was currently working as a nurse, and added that her job requires her to be on her feet throughout the day.

### **Barriers to Walking**

Personal barriers to walking (i.e. health issues) were only mentioned by a few participants and focused on back and foot pain issues. Referring to environmental barriers to walking, comments focused on sidewalk maintenance, area traffic conditions, and lack of adequate street lighting. A few also discussed lack of street benches as a hindrance to walking activity, with one lamenting that while there were only a few poorly maintained benches located throughout Holiday City, three new benches were purchased and installed recently next to one of the development’s bocce ball courts.

Regarding sidewalk maintenance, one participant discussed a specific section of sidewalk that she avoided walking past because of a bump that she has repeatedly tripped over. Another noted that when she tries to walk on area sidewalks, many times trees or shrubs that are not properly trimmed overhang on the sidewalk, creating a hazard. Another vegetation issue commented on was the presence of “prickly pears” along some yards or common areas, which was a concern for both pedestrians and dogs. Participants also complained that they are forced to limit walking activity in the winter months because sidewalk maintenance conditions vary greatly regarding snow removal, which is the responsibility of the homeowner.

Several Holiday City resident participants explained that they would have more walking options if the development cleared and maintained the “common ground” strip of land located in the backyards between Holiday City homes. Currently this area is difficult for residents to walk through due to the presence of prickly pear bushes as well as local wildlife (primarily deer). Several indicated however that if the area was better maintained it would provide a safe and attractive walking trail-like option for residents. Others disagreed, indicating there were too many deer ticks in the area.

A resident of a community without sidewalks stated that traffic was their biggest concern, especially at intersections where many drivers failed to stop at the stop sign. As mentioned during the introduction, one of the communities does not allow residents to walk their dogs on the sidewalks or yards. The same concerns related to traffic were brought up when having to walk one’s dog on the street.

***“I walk my dogs and I’m always afraid . . . (drivers) see you  
and they speed up.”***

Once the issue of unsafe driving was brought up, participants began to discuss various concerns with how drivers behaved on the main arterials surrounding the developments. For example, various attendees noted that they would never walk on a local main thoroughfare called Mule Road, which is where a diner, pharmacy, and many other neighborhood businesses are located. Aside from high speeds, participants stated that because the signals did not have turning arrows, many drivers make quick turns, creating unsafe conditions for pedestrians. One attendee stated that the worst part of her walk was getting from a main roadway to a quieter side street.

***“My fear is getting from the main street to the back street  
so I can walk.”***

***“I wouldn’t walk on Mule Road because people are always  
speeding.”***

Specifically regarding street lights, one participant stated that even though there were street lights present in her development, she still had to walk with a flashlight because the street lights were located too far apart. Five or six participants agreed that their neighborhood streets were not well lit, which limited their ability to walk after dark. However, one remarked that he enjoyed how dimly lit his street was so he could better see the night sky and stars.

***“I wouldn’t walk at night, there’s not enough light.”***

None of the participants cited crime as a reason for not walking, with most stating that they were comfortable walking alone. Those who did walk in groups said they did so for social reasons, not for safety concerns. However, one attendee did express fear of encountering dogs on her walks. Unlike the participants from the Monroe gated community session, none of these attendees mentioned subscribing to a “Life Alert” style service, but most did carry a cell phone with them.

### **Photo Prompts**

Participants were shown photos of local sites of interest in order to spur discussion on what they liked or disliked about the walking conditions in the areas pictured. The photos were different than those shown in the Monroe focus groups, with these featuring a local park called Jakes Branch County Park, a CVS shopping center, several Holiday City community centers/clubhouses, some Holiday City residential roadways, and a second commercial shopping plaza.

Only three of the participants had been to Jakes Branch County Park (Figure 11), even though it is located within five miles of the developments. All who had been to this Park, drove to access it. Those who had traveled previously to the Park spoke positively about its’ trail system, playgrounds, nature center, and the free educational events offered on site. Those who had never been asked about the mosquitos and the type of events offered. One participant stated that she would never use the Park trails that went into the woods because she would feel unsafe/vulnerable in such a secluded space. Another added that seeing the photos, she was very interested in visiting.



**Figure 11: Jakes Branch County Park, Photo 3**

Discussion of the CVS shopping center began with the one attendee who frequently walked to the center to shop (Figure 12). He explained that he was comfortable walking to/from this site because of the available sidewalks, but he was concerned with the dangerous driving behavior he has observed at the nearby signalized intersection. Another participant added that it was impossible to walk from the CVS to the Dollar Store located across the street because there was no crosswalk or traffic signal.





**Figure 12: CVS Shopping Center, Photo 1**

The group was then shown photos of the Holiday City community centers (Figure 13), also known as clubhouses. Three of the participants stated that they walk to the centers because sidewalks are present. Another noted that she drives to the clubhouse because she feels the distance from her home is too far for walking.



**Figure 13: Holiday City Community Centers, Photo 2**

The next photos were of several Holiday City residential streets (Figure 14). One participant stated that he felt the sidewalk in the image was located too close to the roadway, and needed a buffer from vehicular traffic. Another participant added that the sidewalk pavement was not always even, and that the photo showed how the sprinklers would wet the sidewalk, also causing a hazard for pedestrians. Additionally, the photos showed how far apart the street lights were located from one another. One discussion that again arose from reviewing these images was the hazards of walking in the winter, with many complaints that homeowners did not shovel their sidewalks. This lack of sidewalk maintenance forces pedestrians to walk in the roadway, which is unsafe due to ice and vehicular traffic. Hence, many participants again shared that they are forced to limit their walking activity in winter.

***“In winter, no one shovels the sidewalks.”***



**Figure 14: Holiday City Residential Streets, Photo 1**

The final set of photos depicted a second nearby shopping plaza (Figure 15). Unlike the shopping center in Monroe, there were no comments regarding parking lot traffic safety issues. One participant stated that it was the safest location to walk because the nearby winding roadway encouraged slower auto traffic. As one of the photos of the site included an “Ocean Ride” shuttle image, participants were asked if they had ever used the county paratransit service. All replied in the negative, with two however stating that they were glad the service existed in case they needed it in the future.



**Figure 15: Plaza Shopping Centers, Photo 1**

Although downtown Toms River was not included in the photos, the attendees were asked if they were comfortable walking in that area. Most said they were, and that they felt safe doing so. Reasons to go downtown included visiting the larger library, restaurants, and attending programming such as Shakespeare in the Park street fairs, and an annual boat show.

## Recommendations

The discussion ended by engaging the group in a conversation on recommendations for encouraging safe walking in their community. The addition of dedicated walking trails was a popular suggestion, especially a trail with exercise stations (e.g. a “heart healthy trail”). The participants noted that if a

trail was added to the open common areas of their developments, they would be able to walk without worrying about ticks or prickly pears. One participant repeated that she would be comfortable walking along a trail if it had open sightlines, in contrast to the forest trails in the county park that she felt were secluded and unsafe.

Participants mentioned that if sidewalk maintenance was not the responsibility of homeowners, the maintenance would likely be more even. A change in maintenance responsibility would be especially valuable in the winter, when the sidewalks in front of vacant homes are never shoveled and often non shoveled in front of many occupied residences as well.

## ***Conclusions***

While all participants reported driving was their primary transport mode, most also reported undertaking regular safe walking activity, typically walking for fun and/or exercise within their development. However, only two shared walking on occasion beyond their development. Factors influencing this lack of walking beyond their development include the reality that their non-gated community is not close to many local destinations and the difficulty of navigating high-speed traffic at intersections. Fear of drivers not adhering to safe driving practices, especially fellow older drivers, was mentioned often.

In discussing the importance of sidewalks, one participant recommended and several agreed that sidewalk installation should be required by the state for all new housing developments. Participants indicated they were not concerned with criminal activity or with injuring themselves while walking, with all indicating they typically walk alone. Finally, they noted that additional street lighting and better, more regular maintenance of sidewalks could increase senior walking activity.

## **COMMON FINDINGS AND COMPARISONS AMONG FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS**

Notably, the participants of the three focus groups were in agreement on most major topics. All the attendees drove a car as their primary means of transportation, with only one person walking for utilitarian purposes on a daily basis. Mode choice was primarily determined by the suburban or rural location of the senior developments, where substantial distance between homes and area businesses and places of interest necessitate auto travel. However, the majority of participants were amendable to walking activity and tried to stay active by walking for fun or exercise, unless they were limited by personal health reasons, which only limited a few participants. Many of the attendees reported walking to the only destination within their actual development – the neighborhood clubhouse.

How frequent and where the participants chose to walk was mostly based on the availability of sidewalks, and the level of vehicular traffic along the roadways. Regarding sidewalks, few participants discussed sidewalk availability as a major factor in purchasing their current home, but almost all emphasized during the discussion the importance of sidewalks in facilitating their current safe walking activity. Regarding traffic, although most of the participants reported residing too far from desired or needed destinations to walk to those destinations, those who did live within walking distance of a destination opted to limit walking due to traffic safety concerns. Specifically, these concerns focused on high vehicular speeds and dangerous driving behaviors at intersections,

especially failure to stop at posted stop signs, and failing to yield to pedestrians during vehicular turning activity. Interestingly, participants in all three sessions shared complaints about their fellow older drivers, with the common sentiment expressed that many older drivers, especially those who are very elderly, contribute to traffic safety hazards.

Where sidewalks did exist, maintenance was a common concern. Issues raised included sections uplifted by tree routes, branches/bushes overhanging the walkway, and a lack of snow maintenance during the winter. A lack of adequate street lighting was also a concern raised by the majority of all participants, both in terms of creating a tripping/fall hazard for pedestrians, and also contributing to vehicular conflicts.

Most of the attendees – whether they resided in a gated age-restricted community, non-gated age-restricted community, or general community – expressed overall satisfaction with their chosen residence, and appreciated their community’s low crime rates, low property tax rates, and overall lack of congestion in their suburban or rural chosen residence.

However, a desire for more accessible destinations/places of interest within walking distance to their homes was emphasized in all three focus group sessions. These improvements could come in the form of new paved and/or well groomed trails, exercise stations, and neighborhood coffee shops/cafes. Participants emphasized that creation of more places of interest in safe walking distance to their homes would greatly contribute to older adult increased walking activity.

In all three groups, attendees did not express concern with losing their ability to drive safely at some point or even wanting to limit their driving activity as they age. Discussion demonstrated that some were familiar or at least had heard of other potential transportation modes, such as county paratransit, municipal senior shuttle services, or ride hailing services like Uber, but none discussed ever using these services.

Regarding issues such as isolation, it should be mentioned that residents of the age-restricted communities, both gated and non-gated, discussed participating in community social engagements thanks to the availability of development amenities and events. In contrast, those residing outside an age-restricted community lamented the lack of consideration among the Township in considering their needs and in offering community events in which they could partake.

Finally, while personal safety factors related to crime was not a concern for walking activity among focus group participants, concern with personal injury while walking was a concern among several in the two Monroe groups, especially the Monroe gated community participants. These latter participants spoke the most about safety concerns, especially in regards to falling while walking and strategies to access help if they did fall while walking. While it may be that these residents chose to live in a gated community to help alleviate these concerns, the group did skew older than those from the other two groups, which could also be a factor influencing their perspective on walking activity.